

Warner Castle Sunken Garden

The Sunken Garden on the grounds of historic Warner Castle in Highland Park is one of Rochester's landscape architectural treasures. The garden was designed by noted Landscape Architect Alling Stephen DeForest, 1875-1957.

Warner Castle was designed by Horatio Gates Warner and built as his private residence in 1854. In 1912, Frank and Merry Ackerman Dennis, owners of the Dennis Candy Factory and candy stores purchased it. They commissioned DeForest to design gardens for the site beginning around 1920. His plan for the grounds included the Sunken Garden completed in 1930, a courtyard, rose and woodland gardens.

Alling Stephen DeForest, a Fellow of the American Society of Landscape Architects, contributed to a wide variety of landscape designs, both public and private, during the early 20th Century. He received most of his early training at the prestigious Olmsted Brothers firm in Brookline, Massachusetts. Frederick Law Olmsted, considered the father of landscape architecture in America, was the founder of the firm. DeForest's most notable projects were the original landscape of the George Eastman House on East Avenue in Rochester and the gardens of the Harbel Manor the Akron, Ohio home of the Harvey Firestone. Although the majority of his designs were the landscapes of private estates, he also designed campuses, housing developments, cemeteries and parks.

Frank Dennis died in 1927 and Merry Dennis continued to live in the castle until her death in 1936. Dennis' relatives contested her will and the estate was not settled until eight years after her death. The castle became a sanitarium in 1944 when it was purchased from the estate by Christopher GianCursio a self-styled naturopath.

The City of Rochester bought the property in 1951 and the castle and grounds became part of Highland Park, an internationally known arboretum. The City's Parks Department's offices and herbarium were located in the castle and the Sunken Garden became a popular location for weddings and wedding photographers. The Rochester Civic Garden Center's headquarters now occupy the building.

In 1961 an agreement between the City of Rochester and the County of Monroe turned the responsibility of the maintenance of the castle grounds and Rochester's major parks over to the Monroe County Parks Department.

Time, weather and vandalism took their toll of the garden's infrastructure and in 1988 the garden was closed to the public because of the Monroe County Parks Department's concern for visitors' safety. A year-long study of the site, funded by the Institute for Museum Services, was undertaken by Doell and Doell, Historic Landscape Preservation Planners and Environmental Design and Research, P. C. of Syracuse, NY.

Restoration of the Sunken Garden's infrastructure was completed in October 1991, with funds from Monroe County and an Environmental Quality Bond Act Grant. The garden's stone walls were repointed and missing stones replaced. Paving stones, an

important landscape design element included in DeForest's design for the garden, were also replaced.

The historically appropriate plant material was replaced through the cooperative efforts of the Landmark Society of Western New York, the Seventh District of the Federated Garden Clubs, and the Genesee Finger Lakes Nursery and Landscape Association in 1993. The plant material restoration project received the New York State Preservation League's Historic Landscape Preservation Award in 1995 and illustrates what can be accomplished through the cooperative efforts of the public and private sector.

The Warner Castle Sunken Garden, a significant part of the landscape heritage of Rochester, New York, provides residents and visitors alike with the opportunity to view a planned landscape designed by a noted landscape architect.

Jean M. Czerkas, Landscape Historian